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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Blogging for Sustainability: The Intermediary Role of Personal Green Blogs in Promoting Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media radically broadens the sources and platforms used for environmental communication. Especially personal green blogs are worthy of study as they are spaces of everyday cultural politics through which people make sense of sustainability issues, and because they entail a radical break from conventional media in terms of legitimacy, form, and content of environmental communication processes. This paper studies the representation of sustainability on personal green blogs, and the communication processes through which these representations are constructed. It does so through a qualitative study of Swedish-language blogs. We study three blogs in-depth: a living experiment blog on sustainable food practices; a lifestyle blog centered around green family life; and a blog about consuming green beauty products. The analysis shows that all three blogs translate the complex landscape of sustainability to *individual* everyday practices. Yet, what these sustainability practices entail differs considerably between the blogs, ranging from a-political and doable lifestyle choices to an onset to radical redefining of consumption. Also, the communication processes on the blogs differ in quality and quantity. The paper uses these insights to reflect on the debates about how environmental communication is shaped by blogging and social media practices.

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Sustainability; intermediaries; personal green blogs; digital intermediaries; everyday practices

1. Introduction

The blogosphere is the fastest growing source for environmental information in recent years (Cox, 2012, p. 180). Along with the rise of other social media, the expansion of the blogosphere entails a radical broadening of the sources and platforms for environmental communication (Cox, 2012); here simply understood as the ways we communicate about the environment. Conventional news outlets, such as newspapers or radio channels, no longer have exclusive access to the public ear.¹ Instead, any organization or individual can – in principle – reach and interact with publics that extend far beyond personal and immediate social networks (termed the shift from mass communication to mass *self*-communication by Castells, 2013). New voices on the environment can make themselves heard on blogs,² as well as Twitter and Facebook (Lester & Cottle, 2015).

The impacts of these new sources and platforms for communication and learning have been interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, commentators laud social media as a democratization of environmental information-making (Cox, 2012; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). On the other hand,

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scholars critique social media as a source of low-quality information and undermining constructive dialogue and learning (Sunstein, 2001). In particular, the debate on the impact of social media on environmental communication remains inconclusive. Not in the least because it is difficult to generalize the effects of different varieties of social media (see also Arlt, Hoppe, Schmitt, De Silva-Schmidt, & Brüggemann, 2018).

While the form and content of environmental communication has arguably been much influenced by social media in general, this study zooms in on *personal green blogs* specifically to enable a more detailed exploration. We choose personal green blogs because they are distinct from expert-driven and professional information outlets. Personal green blogs are blogs run by “average” people, i.e. non-experts, non-professionals, and non-celebrities, with a broad interest in sustainability and everyday life. The influence of these blogs is sustained precisely because its information is based on the personal experiences of a peer.

This study aims to contribute to understanding the influence of personal green blogs on the way we communicate about the environment. To this end, we ask two interrelated questions. First, *how is sustainability represented on personal green blogs?* Knowing this is relevant as online platforms shape the information available and influence the norms and values related to sustainability (Haider, 2016). Second, *what does on-blog communication about sustainability look like?* Developing a better understanding of on-blog communication processes is relevant as the discussions among the different participants of the blog, including the blogger, shape representations of sustainability (Champ, Williams, & Lundy, 2013; Haider, 2016). Focus in this paper is on *environmental* sustainability, which we understand as “meeting the resource and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them” (Morelli, 2011). Yet, object of study is not this formal definition but rather the everyday argumentation and representation of sustainability on personal green blogs.

In pursuit of these two questions, we review blogging as environmental communication, highlighting concerns about the effect of social media on environmental communication, and we conceptualize blogging as intermediation (Section 2). We present our qualitative methodology (Section 3), before presenting key findings (Section 4). The analysis demonstrates that while all three blogs translate sustainability to *individual* everyday practices, these practices vary considerably. The paper uses these insights to reflect on the debate about the effects of personal green blogs on environmental communication (Section 5).

2. Blogging and environmental communication

Social media actors are playing an increasing role in reporting on the environment and climate change in particular (Boykoff, McNatt, & Goodman, 2015, p. 222). Also the blogosphere has grown in importance vis-à-vis conventional information sources (Cox, 2012, p. 180).³ While once thought of as a short-lived fad, blogs are no upstart community. Instead, blogs – together with other social media – signal a radical change in environmental information-making (Boykoff et al., 2015), and are a key influence on mainstream narratives about the environment (Cox, 2012, p. 182; Haider, 2012). Below, we discuss these effects of social media on environmental information and communication in more detail.

The development of social media has entailed a radical change in access of information, how people interact with information, and also “whose information counts.” Firstly, access to environmental information has increased dramatically, with social media contributing with, for example, firsthand accounts and footage of environmental disasters by citizen journalists (Cox, 2012). Secondly, social media has changed how people interact with information, as it entails a move from the one-way traditional news outlets to more interactive communication (Boykoff et al., 2015). Indeed, information shared on social media is often viewed as part of larger and ongoing conversations between a wider range of actors. Lastly, social media entails a drastic break with respect to who is authorized to speak (Boykoff et al., 2015). No longer do professionals and politicians have the

exclusive legitimacy to make and disseminate environmental information. Instead, as Brainard puts it: “blogs are the penny press newspapers of the 21st century, allowing every citizen to share his or her views on the world” (Brainard, 2015, p. 171). It has been argued that as citizens gain a public voice, industry and government lose control over environmental communication (Lester & Cottle, 2015).

Considering the above, the increasing importance of blogs and social media vis-à-vis traditional media has been interpreted as “a shift to a participatory model of content generation and sharing” (Cox, 2012, p. 183) and as “the absolute democratization of publishing” (Brainard, 2015, p. 171). However, scholars have also asked attention for how social media may compromise the quality of (environmental) communication, such as through (1) *confirmation bias*, meaning that users of blogs and social media tend to only engage with others holding similar opinions, leading social media platforms to function as *echo-chambers* (Garrett, 2009; Sunstein, 2001), where dissonant views are absent, and existing beliefs are reinforced; (2) *the end of conversation*, referring to the idea that social media and blogs rarely cater to in-depth conversation and learning through genuine dialogue (Turkle, 2015; Wilhelm, 1998); (3) *intransparent information-making*, meaning that social media is not scrutinized by scientific and journalist rules and routines (Lester & Cottle, 2015), allowing for the creation and spread of low-quality information (Brabazon, 2006; Gupta, Lamba, Kumar-aguru, & Joshi, 2013), and “short-circuiting” of traditional peer-review processes (Boykoff et al., 2015, p. 225). Moreover, social media is increasingly owned by companies that shape form and content to fit their purposes (Fuchs, 2017). In combination with the sheer quantity of blogs and other online information sources the internet becomes “a bewildering place where quality of information can be hard to judge” (Brainard, 2015, p. 172); and (4) *the reproduction of the idea of individualization of responsibility*, social media have been singled out as enactors par excellence (Paterson & Strippel, 2010) of the idea that individuals are co-responsible for solving complex societal and environmental problems through sustainable consumption and lifestyle choices (Christensen, Godskesen, Gram-Hanssen, Quitzau, & Røpke, 2007; Halkier, 2016; see e.g. Cooper, Green, Burningham, Evans, & Jackson, 2012 for sustainable consumption and lifestyle choices). It is argued that social media invites for the showcasing of sustainable lifestyles as hyper-individual projects (Paterson & Strippel, 2010, p. 341), focusing on sustainability as “minor changes in everyday routines” (as described in Boström, Lidskog, & Uggla, 2017, p. 11), taking attention away from the role and responsibility of governments and corporations (Soneryd & Uggla, 2015), and undermining potential for collective political action (Maniates, 2001).

The debate about the influence of social media on environmental information-making and communication remains inconclusive, among others because social media encompass a wide range of *technologies* and also *practices*, each impacting the nature of information and communication differently. First, different communication *technologies* (for example, social network applications such as Facebook; micro-blogs such as Twitter; video-sharing websites such as YouTube; Whatsapp; and blogs) are suited for a particular range of activities (i.e. they invite for certain activities, cf. affordance, Norman, 1999 and Haider, 2016). Second, not only do different social media technologies shape what people can do in different ways (compare with the idea of “devising consumers” Cochoy, Hagberg, McIntyre, & Sörum, 2017, p. 7), but at the same time “people, through their social *practices*, shape what the technology can do” (Hine, 2017, p. 23, authors’ emphasis). Therefore, in order to understand the effect of social media, we must consider the specific technologies and how these technologies are put to work in social practices (Hine, 2017).

To this end, we focus on a specific blog type, namely green personal blogs. To date, in environmental communication research little attention has been paid to “average” people and personal green blogs, and more on expert, professional, or organizational blogs, i.e. blogs from NGO’s, journalists or scientists (see e.g. Swenson & Olsen, 2017), or celebrity blogs (e.g. Doyle, 2016). This reflects a broader trend, where research often focuses on one-way environmental communication from more formal communication sources, such as information campaigns from governments or NGOs. As such, a gap in the literature is an understanding of people’s personal online accounts and interactions when dealing with sustainability in everyday life (Haider, 2012). A focus on personal

green blogs can help amend this neglect in several ways. Firstly, these blogs are spaces of everyday cultural politics through which we can explore how people make sense of, and deal with, sustainability issues. Secondly, green personal blogs represent a more radical break from conventional media than the other blog-forms in terms of (1) “whose knowledge counts”; (2) the processes of information-making and interactivity; (3) but as we will argue, also the sort of information that is presented.

We understand personal green bloggers and blogs to perform an intermediary function, translating the complex landscape of sustainability practices for their readers, mediating how these practices are perceived and engaged with by their readers (adapted from Smith Maguire, 2014, p. 2; Joosse & Hracs, 2015). The traditional media have always “intermediated” information; for example, translating science to the general public (Boykoff et al., 2015), offering the readers a certain understanding of knowledge. In recent times, social media and blogs in particular have taken up this intermediary function as well. Intermediaries are commonly understood to have some kind of expertise which grants them authority and legitimacy (Smith Maguire, 2014). While personal green bloggers are not characterized by formal or professional expertise, they should rather be seen as “ordinary experts,” whose expertise is linked to “the ordinary” and the everyday life, in contrast to the expertise of celebrities or professionals (Lewis, 2008).

3. Methodology and materials

In previous research, social media is often seen as a place to get data about how people think about social issues (see Matthews, 2015). Yet, communication on social media is not merely or necessarily a reflection of offline practices, but rather a meaning-making experience in itself (Champ et al., 2013; Marres & Moats, 2015). There is a need for qualitative insight in the dynamics between bloggers, readers, commenters, and followers, and in particular, how this influences on-blog communication about sustainability. We focus on Swedish-language blogs because Sweden has a reputation for sustainability and environmental policies and citizen engagement (Olausson, 2018) and hosts a large number of green blogs.

Our methodological approach consists of three parts, namely: (1) exploring the landscape of personal green blogs in Swedish; (2) categorizing these blogs; and (3) analyzing three blogs in-depth. In developing our selection of blogs to study, first we wanted to get an overview of the diversity of personal green blogs (Table 1). Through snowball-selection (blogs linking to other blogs), through sites’ listings (e.g. the best green blog) and through searching keywords such as green blog and eco-blog), we compiled a list of 100 green blogs.

For each blog, we assigned a code that described its area of focus. Step 2 of our analysis was to review and consolidate related codes. For example, all of the different blogs related to food practices were merged into one category. This step produced a categorization consisting of six main categories of personal green blogs from our selection (Table 2).

In order to conduct an in-depth analysis and allow for comparison between blogs, we decided to focus on the three most prevalent categories in our selection as displayed in Table 2, namely sustainable lifestyle, organic skincare and/or beauty products, and sustainable food practices. We chose one blog from each type to study in more detail and used a purposive sampling technique and chose three blogs with a large number of blog posts and consistent in producing new blogs. While each of the blogs is thus chosen from one of the three categories, they are not representative. The variety within each of the categories in representation of sustainability and on-blog interaction is too large, instead the selection of these three is meant to allow for an in-depth analysis of what sustainability on green personal blogs can look like.

In conducting a textual analysis of each blog, we began by analyzing the first blog post of each month for each of the three blogs, from the beginning of the blog until September 2015. For each blog post, we explored the question What are the sustainable lifestyle practices presented? This initial exploration provided insight into the tone and content of each of the three blogs. Next, from each

Table 1. Personal green blogs in Sweden.

Name of the blog	Area of focus	Location
Kicki's blog	Organic food	Sweden
Husfarden (Goodman)	Organic and local food	Sweden
Home of Kikan	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
Ekoenkelt (Eco Simple)	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Between forest and farm	Nature and sustainability	Sweden
La vie est belle	Organic skincare and beauty products	Sweden
Natural Skincare	Organic skincare and beauty products	Sweden
Choices by Annie	Recycling and environmental sustainability	Sweden
My Food	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
Go Green Makeup	Organic skincare and beauty products	Sweden
Karoline's Vintage	Sustainable fashion and vintage clothing	Sweden
Unsprayed	Organic food	Sweden
Eko-ista	Organic skincare and organic food	Sweden
I love Eco	Organic skincare and organic food	Sweden
Bilbo blue eyes	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Spentatistan	Organic food	Sweden
Johanna's Eko Blog	Sustainable fashion	Sweden
Cecilia Folkesson Eko Blog	Organic food	Sweden
Hilda's home	Rural/country life	Sweden
Ekopappan (Eko Dad)	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Body Baazar Blog	Organic skincare and beauty products	Sweden
Naturligt Snugg (Naturally Stylish)	Organic skincare and beauty products	Sweden
Chic and Fair	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Alternative bBog	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
Eko Morsian (Eco Bride)	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
A Cup of Tea	Organic food (tea)	Sweden
The Kitchen Garden	Organic food (grow your own)	Sweden
Evelina's Eko Blog	Organic products and homemade recipes	Sweden
Hippihaxan (Hippe Witch)	Environment and cooking	Sweden
Eco Chic	Ecological lifestyle	Sweden
Beauty Comes Clean	Organic skincare/beauty products	Sweden
Ekosmetika (Eco Cosmetics)	Organic skincare/beauty products	Sweden
Chemical Father	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
Mrs Watts	Renewable energy	Sweden
Ekoplantan (Eco Nursery)	Ecological lifestyle (raw materials)	Sweden
A Healthy Dose of Green	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Ekofamiljen (Eco Family)	Sustainable lifestyle; family focus	Sweden
Organic Makers	Recipe blog for make your own	Sweden
Ecoliving Blog	Organic skincare and organic food	Sweden
Underbara Clara	Sustainable lifestyle; family and rural focus	Sweden
Sweden.se Student blog	Living in a green city	Sweden
Laplander's Natural Lore blog	Nature and outdoor rural living	Sweden
Off the Grid	Sustainable lifestyle ("tiny house")	Sweden
Living the Raw Life!	Organic food (raw food)	Sweden
Emma Sundh	Vintage clothing	Sweden
Odlä min mat (Grow My Food)	Farming, home-grown food and sustainability	Sweden
A Grower's Notes	Sustainable lifestyle (gardening)	Sweden
Peppen	Veganism, yoga, and sustainable living	Sweden
Sara Berglund Eko Fitness	Eco fitness blog	Sweden
Grön livsstil (Green Lifestyle)	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Helena's Sustainable Blog	Sustainable lifestyle (products and inspiration)	Sweden
Uncle Green	Organic food (grow your own)	Sweden
Everything about the Environment	Organic and Fair Trade products	Sweden
Camino	"Inspiration for a smarter lifestyle"	Sweden
Enterprising Green Moderate	Green entrepreneur and innovator blog	Sweden
Air for sale	Information about sustainable consumption	Sweden
Life after oil	How to live more sustainably with respect to oil/energy consumption	Sweden
Eko prylar (Eco Gadgets)	Eco-consumption (technology related)	Sweden
Bosses' climate and politics	Retired economist writing about environment	Sweden
Sustainability and "ekolyx"	Personal thoughts on environmental sustainability	Sweden
Left Climate Network	About environment and climate change	Sweden
Environmental Awareness	Blog about better living habits	Sweden
Asphalt Jungle	Against SUVs and their environmental impact	Sweden

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Name of the blog	Area of focus	Location
Energy without Fossil	How to live more sustainably with respect to oil/energy consumption	Sweden
Earth Bit	Organic food (grow your own, local, permaculture)	Sweden
Mini Planet	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Pia's Blog	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Your Environment	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Green Every Day	Sustainable lifestyle and food	Sweden
Freya's Environmental Blog	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Not Buying Blog	No consumption for one year	Sweden
The forest	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
In the 11th hour	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
My Dream World	Sustainable lifestyle (teenage girls)	Sweden
Lukas' Thoughts	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Consumption Free Years	No consumption for one year	Sweden
Energy Expert	Sustainable lifestyle (focus on oil/energy consumption)	Sweden
Ljungbergs Blog	Urban environments ("Save the world while doing good business")	Sweden
Karin's Environmental Blog	Sustainable consumption	Sweden
Eko Lisa	Personal blog about lifestyle changes	Sweden
365 Eko	1 Year Eco-Challenge	Sweden
Miss Eko	How to be a more sustainable citizen	Sweden
Tessa Eko Blog	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Sara's Eko Blog	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Eko Mamma	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
Eko Parent	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
Elisabet Nielsen's blog	Organic skincare	Sweden
Fröken Ekoreko	Young woman discussing environment	Sweden
Green and Bloggen	Sustainable consumption (with a webshop)	Sweden
Grona Pengar (Green Money)	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Hallbara Handlingar (Sustainable Actions)	About sustainable consumer choices and green living	Sweden
En Odlares Anteckningar (A Grower's Notes)	sustainable lifestyle, life on farm, growing own food	Sweden
Lev Mer På Mindre (Live More on Less)	Rural/country life	Sweden
Two Green Spirits	Two women on environmental justice	Sweden
Eko Simple	Sustainable lifestyle	Sweden
Ekomorsan	Sustainable living	Sweden
Eko Love it or Leave It	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
Ekotipset (Eco Tips)	Parenting and sustainability	Sweden
Softskin Blog	Organic skincare/beauty products	Sweden

Table 2. Most prevalent green blog categories.

Consolidated blog coding categories	Number of blogs
Sustainable Lifestyle	56
Organic Food	13
Organic Skincare and Beauty Products	13
Parenting and Sustainability	9
Rural/Country Life	5
Other	4

blog, we then selected a "typical" post for the blog and a post about an issue that all three blogs discussed – and coded these blog posts.

4. Analysis

The analysis consists of three parts. In Section 4.1, we present our typology of green personal blogs and introduce the three blogs that are in focus for this paper. In Section 4.2, the analysis serves to answer the first research question, namely how is sustainability represented on these three blogs. In Section 4.3, we move to the second research question, namely what does on-blog communication about sustainability look like on the three blogs?

4.1. Presenting the typology and the personal green blogs under study

The typology presented below serves as a methodological tool to motivate the selection of the blogs that we studied in-depth. The typology is not exclusive or exhaustive.

- *Sustainable food practices*: These blogs are focused on sustainability through changing the way we eat and our relationship to food. Often such blogs take the form of a personal challenge or experiment, such as changing food habits and/or sourcing more sustainable food.
- *Sustainable lifestyle*: These blogs portray environmental sustainability as a transition to a simpler way of living. For some, this is about life in the countryside, while for others it is about mindfulness and a slower pace of life. A number of these blogs also focus on the family and describe sustainability in relation to domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or childcare.
- *Organic skincare and/or beauty products*: These blogs are geared towards the evaluation of sustainable skincare and/or beauty products and encourage the reader to consume with more awareness. These blogs are sometimes linked to a web shop, where readers can purchase items under discussion.

From the above categories, we selected *Husfadern* (“the Goodman” or “the Domestic Man” in English) for sustainable food practices, *Underbara Clara* (“Wonderful Clara”) for sustainable lifestyle, and *Naturligt Snygg* (“Naturally Stylish”) for organic skincare and/or beauty products. Next, we introduce these blogs and bloggers.

4.1.1. Sustainable food practices and the green living experiment

Husfadern is a living experiment blog focused on food that was started in 2011 by a 39-year-old musician from Stockholm, who narrates about his challenge to only consume products purchased directly from a producer or produced by himself. Through experimenting with consumption and describing everyday practicalities in detail, the blog inspires readers to take up his challenge. The information presented and communicated through this blog is the “lived” experience of everyday sustainable consumption. The blogger earns his living through his music, and the blog does not generate income. However, it has generated notoriety and he occasionally participates in media events. In 2014, the blog received approximately 10,000 views a month. There is no larger social media profile connected to the blog (for example, he is not on Twitter and his Facebook account is not linked to his online “alter ego”). Over the years the blogger has taken several breaks, stating that the blog takes too much of his time. The last post on the blog was on October 2016, and the blog seems inactive ever since.

4.1.2. Sustainable living and green family life

Underbara Clara was started in 2008 by a 29-year-old photographer based in Northern Sweden, as a forum to discuss (eco-) living across a variety of subjects, from food, self-sufficiency, and animal-keeping to fashion and décor. The blog embeds the concept of sustainability in the blogger’s narrative of her family life(style) in a rural place and invites people into her home, through attractive photos of daily activities. The photos offer an intimate portrayal of sustainable family life as idyllic and esthetically pleasing. The blog is a self-described coffee party or space to discuss politics, sustainability, and pop culture, but also to share DIY (do-it-yourself) green living tips. *Underbara Clara* is active on Facebook and Instagram with 69,000 followers as of December 2017. Over time, blogging has become the foundation of this blogger’s working life: She lectures about blogging and/or green living, is the author of numerous books, has organized online courses on blogging and entrepreneurship, partnered with clothing companies, and designed a vintage-inspired line based on her style from the blog. More recently, she started producing podcasts (from August 2016) and vlogs (from December 2016). In January 2017, she became president of a newly established association for bloggers and vloggers called “Influencers of Sweden.”

4.1.3. Consuming green and organic skincare and/or beauty products

Naturligt Snygg was started in 2008 by a 40-something female blogger based in Stockholm, and comprises reviews of organic and/or eco-friendly skincare and beauty products based on the blogger's own experiences. The blog is inspirational, as posts aim to encourage readers to think about trying organic cosmetics, and educational, as readers are given background information to help them choose products. Over time, the commercial side of the blog has grown increasingly important and the blog evolved from a primarily personal blog to a professional platform with other bloggers and a webshop. The blog receives 40,000 unique readers and 200,000 page views a month, as well as 3000 likes on Facebook and approximately 2500 followers on Instagram as of August 2015. This blog is professionalized, e.g. professional photoshopped images, a clear revenue stream, but is not a full-time job, as the blogger also writes for a newspaper and other media outlets about eco-friendly beauty products. This blogger recently published a book about green beauty.

The three blogs share a number of traits. They all articulate an interest in and ideas for living more sustainably in different ways. All three blogs involve a similar network of participants: bloggers, readers, commentators, advertisers, other bloggers, and followers. All blogs have comment fields and are presented in a reverse diary order. But the blogs also differ. In the next section, we discuss these differences pertaining to our first research question.

4.2. How is sustainability represented?

In comparing the three blogs, we begin with *Husfadern*. Sustainability as represented on this blog requires significant changes in everyday practices and the organization of society. This fits the format of green living experiments (Marres, 2009), in which new ways of sustainable living are tried out, during which personal and societal barriers preventing change are highlighted. *Husfadern* proposes substantial lifestyle changes to consume less and engage in DIY practices as strategies to avoid support to larger companies, which are seen as harmful for the environment. *Husfadern* promotes the idea of individual action for sustainability, as featured in the following excerpt from his blog:

Now, if I do not like the Swedish chicken factories where 10,000 overfed chickens become cheap food to the Swedish people every day, then I should teach myself how they did it back in the good old days when there was a small slaughterhouse at both ends of every little village. And how they still do it today on the small farms. Now it was time. (15 August 2012)

The post gives a negative assessment about how chickens are currently produced and emphasizes individual responsibility for doing something about it. As a further example of this stance, later in the same post, the blogger posits that if killing a chicken is too hard, one should become a vegetarian instead. Interestingly, while this excerpt may sound like a moral accusation, the tone on the blog is never judging; the blogger never addresses the reader directly by saying "you," but instead keeps it more general and writes either "I" (as in the first quote above) or "one" (as in the second quote above).

On the other hand, *Underbara Clara* represents sustainability as part of a wholesome lifestyle. Sustainable choices are embedded in a slower-paced family life, with a mix of advocating for sustainability through DIY and the reuse of products, as well as buying second-hand and/or high-quality new products. In several blogs and comments, sustainability is associated with individual responsibility through the idea that "little green steps" make a difference (as described in the following post *Little Green Steps* (2 November 2015):

I want to give some of my best tips for a little greener planet. Small green steps that make a difference:

- Eat less meat
- When you need to make purchases, start by looking at second hand and flea market instead of buying new
- Choose organic in the grocery store

- Avoid harsh chemicals when cleaning. [...]
- Join the Nature Conservation Society [...]

The post emphasizes that every person can contribute to a more sustainable society through minor changes in everyday life. However, at times both the blogger and her readers contest this idea. In a post, titled “Class and Climate,” the blogger takes a critical stance and argues that Swedish politics is incapable of addressing climate change, leaving it to individuals to make the “right” consumption choices. She argues that this enables the rich to be “climate heroes” and saddles up the poor with a guilty conscience. This particular post generated intense debate on the blog about the nature of sustainability and the role of individuals in achieving sustainability.

Finally, *Naturligt Snygg* puts forward an image of sustainability emerging through consuming organic and eco-friendly products. Sustainability is not about consuming *less*, but rather consuming *better* by choosing environmentally friendly produced goods. The role of a citizen is to make informed decisions and consume consciously, e.g. a locally made and/or organic shampoo, rather than a mass-market brand. Thus, in contrast to *Husfadern*, this blog puts faith in the transformative power of consumer choice through conventional market purchases. The blogger states that by choosing the right products, you contribute not only to your own health but also the health of the planet. The next quote serves to illustrate the blog’s idea that sustainability and consumption go hand in hand: “you can both make sustainable consumption choices and still use luxurious and glamorous beauty products” (from the 2016 book *Naturligt Snygg: This way you do a beauty detox*). Rather than limiting consumption, readers are encouraged to purchase brands that are environmentally friendly instead of “cheap products (from which you do not know the origins)” (from post *Green Luxury weekend with* [name of company], 14 October 2013).

The contrast between *Naturligt Snygg* and especially *Husfadern* can be usefully illustrated with the recent announcement that the blogger is embarking on a year without shopping. But, rather than trying to limit shopping to the minimum as one would expect after reading the announcement, she pledged to stop unnecessary shopping. For example, she commits to not buying any more woolen sweaters, as she already has 8 or 9 in her closet (17 January 2017). So while the challenge of non-shopping sounds related to ideas put forward on *Husfadern*, the translation to what it means in practice is quite different.

In sum, all three blogs translate the complex landscape of sustainability practices to what *individuals* can do in their everyday practices. Yet, the ideas of what this responsibility entails, i.e. what individuals can and should do, differ between the blogs. For example, *Husfadern* encourages individuals to avoid conventional market purchases for their food sourcing, instead proposing direct contact with producers or DIY. With this stance, *Husfadern* is in line with ideas about re-embedding production and consumption relations in local contexts through re-evaluating and re-discovering food and food production (Kloppenburger, Hendrickson, & Stevenson, 1996). Such efforts to fundamentally redefine consumption are not present on the other two blogs. The idea of sustainability is topic of discussion for *Underbara Clara*, but in general comes down to moderate lifestyle changes. The readers of *Naturligt Snygg* are foremost addressed as conscious consumers that should choose the more sustainable alternatives on the market. Notwithstanding that none of the blogs explicitly states that it is only through individual action that change will come about, each of them produce and reproduce norms about what is appropriate, fitting and also sufficient engagement with environmental issues (Soneryd & Uggle, 2015) and what lifestyles are desirable (Doyle, 2016).

4.3. What does on-blog communication look like?

Typical for personal green blogs is that the initiative for the blog posts lies with the blogger, who starts the blog and decides what to post about. However, the ideas of sustainability presented on the blog are not exclusively produced by the blogger. The blog is rather a site where meaning is made through a series of interactions between a variety of participants. While all three blogs use a

similar blog design and all aim to inspire readers through personal stories and experiences, the types of interaction on each of the three blogs differ considerably. Below we discuss the interaction on the blogs in more detail, after which we explore the reasons for these differences.

Interaction on blogs occurs in the form of comments, Facebook or Instagram “likes,” and statistics about page views and blog followers. All blogs we investigated have comment fields, and here we focus on the interaction through the comments. Firstly, the blogs differ in terms of the frequency and intensity of reader engagement. While *Underbara Clara*’s posts consistently generate a large amount of comments (sometimes over 300 for a single post), many posts on *Husfadern* and *Naturligt Snygg* go uncommented. This does not mean that the posts go unnoticed – both *Husfadern* and *Naturligt Snygg* are well-read blogs – but that readers do not comment. Secondly, the blogs vary with respect to the nature of the comments, ranging from supportive comments, information requests, sharing experience or knowledge, asking for attention for their own blog, and critical comments. By far, the majority of comments are supportive. In fact, only *Underbara Clara* features critical comments, typically triggering discussion. This brings us to a third difference: the blogs differ in the amount and sort of discussions. On *Naturligt Snygg*, we found hardly any interaction in the comment fields – i.e. comment on comments – while on *Husfadern*, there is occasionally interaction when a reader shares personal experience or knowledge and the blogger acknowledges that information. In contrast, *Underbara Clara*’s comment section frequently becomes a platform for discussion.

There are several reasons for the difference between blogs in the amount and type of comments and discussions. One reason is that *Underbara Clara* discusses a large variety of topics, attracting a wide group of readers, while *Husfadern* and *Naturligt Snygg* address more narrow topics of interest. A diverse group of readers is likely to have wider perspectives, and therefore is more likely to comment. Yet another reason is the representation of *Underbara Clara* as a coffee party. There are many comments, and comments threads, which is more inviting for readers to add comments than the empty comment fields in the other blogs. Also, *Underbara Clara* has a loyal and engaged reader base⁴ and readers sometimes identify themselves as friends. Other explanations for the differences in quantity and quality of interaction stem from the nature of the information, as we will discuss next.

Through focusing on *how* instead of *why* to do sustainability, *Husfadern* triggers: (1) a range of positive comments, indicating that the readers of the blog are like-minded; and (2) comments for practical clarification indicating that the readers are (thinking of) undertaking similar experiments. *Husfadern* featured no comments that challenged blog posts or other readers’ comments. In contrast on *Underbara Clara*, controversial posts are a strategy from the blogger to increase readership and discussion, as she states: “that which provokes sells.” Yet, the blogger describes how she has become more careful in what she writes because of the negative comments she has received over the years. Moreover, in another discussion, the blogger dismissed critical comments. This prompted a reader comment that the blogger should understand that her provocative posts raise debate and that the opportunity to “gather on this blog and discuss important and timely issues is great” (15 May 2014), demonstrating that some see critical discussion as an asset of the blog. The discussion which ensued after the post “Class and Climate” on *Underbara Clara* illustrates the possibilities for in-depth conversations on a blog. Initially, the discussion centered around practical choices – e.g. if it is better to buy a new green car, or to continue using an old, conventional car. Later on, the discussion became more personal and critical, as in the following example where the blogger’s lifestyle was critiqued:

Well, if you [the blogger] fly on business trips (short / long), collaborate with Panduro (come and buy, more novelty-consumption for the people!), wallpaper companies (hurry up and grab the renovation you longing for!), design clothes (dress is not just for decoration on a hanger at the factory, right?) etc., then you need to have a little humbler attitude to be credible. Your beautiful sofa from Norrgavel [company], does not count as Tärnsjö [environmental production company] shopping or, Clara?

Greetings [from person with] a 10-year-old car, home full of second hand stuff, cloth diapers for children and not responsible for a single holiday trip to Thailand.

As more commenters became involved in the discussion, the critique broadened and deepened. Several discussions on *Underbara Clara* uncover points of contention that allow blog participants to reflect on their own practices and those of others. Sometimes such discussions lead to changes also in the blogger's opinions as in the next example. When the blogger wrote a post against toothpaste with fluorine, a long discussion instigated by a dentist came about, followed by a response by the blogger: "I have read all comments and every research I found and I am no longer afraid to give fluorine toothpaste to my kids" (20 March 2017). Such discussions demonstrate the critical capacities of the participants and the self-moderation enabled by Web 2.0 (Cooper et al., 2012).

Contrary to *Underbara Clara*, the comment fields on *Naturligt Snygg* are rarely utilized, and the blog seems not to invite discussion. A number of factors contribute to this. Firstly, the blogger is approached as a more traditional expert, knowledgeable about the chemistry of cosmetics, and as such, the comments are mostly soliciting advice. In the next excerpt, the commenter politely asks for information and the way she asks illustrates the distance between blogger and reader: "Excuse me, but I have to ask if you know if Propanedial is something that one should avoid?" (comment on 13 February 2018). *Underbara Clara* has much more of a personal atmosphere, and as such, the threshold for commenting may be perceived as lower. Secondly, even if *Naturligt Snygg* sometimes features a short discussion of sustainability or broader environmental politics, the focus is quite narrowly on the quality and results of products, thus limiting scope for discussions. Interestingly, it is difficult for the blogger to change reader engagement, as we can see from a comparison of blogs: a spring 2014 *Naturligt Snygg* post of more than 300 words with pictures about cleaning, asking readers to share their experiences – "do you have any favorite green cleaners in your broom cupboard?" – received no responses. *Underbara Clara* wrote a nearly identical post in 2010 and received 21 comments. This example makes clear that on-blog communication is not created based on single posts, nor dependent solely on the technological design of the blog, but also based on the earlier discussions taking place on the blog, creating norms, expectations, and patterns for interaction.

Importantly, the lack of discussion does not mean that *Husfadern* or *Naturligt Snygg* do not impact their readers. On *Naturligt Snygg*, the blog posts may impact reader's practices considerably especially because of the easy links for the reviewed products to the webshop. On *Husfadern*, hands-on posts make it easier for people to imagine and enact new food habits, and such posts may easily be used as a manual, as illustrated by the following comment on a picture-heavy post on how to slaughter a rooster: "Thanks for great information. We need to slaughter two of our roosters but did not at all know how to [go about it]" (13 April 2017). This comment was posted five years after the blogpost demonstrating that the post offers continued inspiration after all this time. The power of the post is that *Husfadern* shares his fears and his inexperience with slaughtering, making it easier for readers to identify with him, trust him, and imagine themselves performing similar practices. The blogger is not an expert in slaughtering, but having performed the practice as an average person, he gained legitimacy as an "expert of experience," able to give exactly that kind of advice that novices to the practice need. This expertise of experience in sustainable everyday practices is a distinct aspect of all three blogs.

In sum, the three blogs differ greatly in on-blog interaction in terms of quantity and quality of comments and discussions, for several reasons. A first reason is a difference in size, variety and loyalty in reader base, and the diversity of topics featured on the blog. Second, how sustainability is discussed influences the quantity and quality of comments. More hands-on blogs like *Husfadern* and *Naturligt Snygg* do not invite discussions, but rather receive questions for advice and supportive comments. *Underbara Clara* features posts that are provocative, engaging a diversity of readers. While *Husfadern* and *Naturligt Snygg* generate little discussion, their hands-on advice for sustainability practices may well influence readers' practices.

5. Discussion and conclusion

While intermediation has always existed (Joosse & Hracs, 2015), it takes on a different form on Web 2.0 technologies. Our findings demonstrate that “personalized” environmental communication online has a logic and dynamic of its own, whereby the intermediary role of the traditional experts has shifted to “experts of experience.” Bloggers gain legitimacy and trust through their stories about their (more or less ordinary) everyday lives. Rather than merely mediating scientific knowledge and disseminating information, personal green blogs act as key intermediaries by brokering green norms, tastes, and identities, translating the complex concept of sustainability at the “street level” into ideas and hands-on advice on desirable sustainability practices (Doyle, 2016; Soneryd & Uggla, 2015). This intermediary function has gained, and will maintain, prominence as individuals try to negotiate their individual responsibility and identity in relation to complex environmental problems (Joosse & Hracs, 2015).

We have organized the following discussion according to the research questions that guide this study. First we asked: *how is sustainability represented on personal green blogs?* Rather than focusing on politics, companies, or concerted action, the blogs in our study focus on the individual as the location for change for the environment. In doing so, they reinforce the *individualization of responsibility* (see Section 2). This is not surprising. One reason is that this idea permeates the Swedish culture; since the 1980s, the political establishment has increasingly promoted measures oriented at individual behavior changes as an effective, and indeed desirable, strategy to mitigate environmental degradation (Anshelm in Dahl, 2014; Soneryd & Uggla, 2011). Another reason is that personal green blogs by definition focus on the personal. The format of blogs as diaries and the sharing of personal information thus invite a representation of sustainability as something that is and can be performed in everyday life. Moreover, as Haider (2016) argues, personal green blogs become the enactor of self-government, enabled through the blog design of diary narration, public display of the individual, and peer critique.

The focus on individual action comes with the danger that “consuming right” becomes the answer to complex socio-ecological problems, rather than questioning consumerism altogether and working towards broader structural and political change (DeLind, 2011; Kent, 2009; Maniates, 2001). Our study demonstrates that while blogs may promote sustainability as consumerism (Boström et al., 2017), they also cater to individual practices that can fundamentally redefine consumption. Individualization of responsibility can have reproductive (in the case of *Naturligt Snygg*) but also disruptive (in the case of *Husfadern*) effects on the way we organize our economies and societies. This finding resonates with the argument that individualization (as enacted on personal green blogs) is often accompanied by a reflexivity that may lead to a critical questioning and rejection of consumerism (Boström et al., 2017; Paterson & Strippel, 2010; Soneryd & Uggla, 2015) and with the idea that individual practices play a role in societal change (Haider, 2016; Paterson & Strippel, 2010).

Despite that these Swedish-language blogs origin from a country with relatively homogenous attitudes toward the environment (Haider, 2012), and despite that personal green blogs designate a very specific group within social media, these three blogs address sustainability in different ways. This is a relevant finding because if Swedish-language personal green blogs already exhibit such variety, we expect at least a similar but likely broader variety in depiction of sustainability globally.

The second question we ask is *How does on-blog communication about sustainability take place?* The three blogs differ greatly with respect to on-blog interaction. We suggested several reasons for this, namely: (1) diversity in reader base; (2) diversity of topics that the blogs themselves take up; and (3) how sustainability is discussed. The hands-on blogs generated little discussion, whereas the provocative blog could generate intense debates. Those instances demonstrate, “that the affordances of social media actually help disagreements based on social identities to surface discursively” (Olausson, 2018, p. 40). Yet, in other instances, blogs are not at all sites where disagreements are articulated and instead interaction is purely confirmatory or lacking. This speaks to the importance of

understanding the power and affordances of technology in relation to practices, whereby it is crucial how those technologies are put to work by the various participants of the platform.

Connecting these findings to the concerns (listed in Section 2) about *confirmation bias*, the *end of conversation*, and *lack of transparency in information-making*, we suggest that narrow topic blogs (such as living experiment or green product reviews) attract like-minded people and generate little conversation and discussion. As such, these blogs rarely feature discussions that challenge the sustainability ideas of the blogger, but rather *confirm* conceived ideas. The broader lifestyle blog format invites discussion and more in-depth *conversation*; although also here conversation is limited because of the hierarchical design with often anonymous or first name comments. As we stated at the start of this discussion, the information that the blogs broker is not scientific, but consists of opinions and personal experience and evaluation, thus shaping norms and ideas. Thus, most of the information these blogs display is not the kind of material that can be checked based on reports or scientific articles. When bloggers do share falsifiable information, such as reviewing the health effects of cosmetics, checks to ensure that such information-making is correct and *transparent* are lacking. Only on the broader lifestyle blog, the ideas have been challenged by readers.

And yet, even blogs with little discussion may have considerable effect on readers. In our study, the hands-on blogs both make it easy for their readers to imagine and perform the practices proposed by the blogger. A green purchase is but a click away with *Naturligt Snygg*, while *Husfadern* provides addresses and manuals for a transformation of food practices. Other than the descriptions the readers give about their practices in the comment fields, our textual analysis does not provide insight in the effects of the intermediation on offline practices, nor in the broader communication and sense-making practices of which the blog texts are part. These would be relevant avenues for future study.

Notes

1. Importantly, environmental information is also available through popular culture.
2. "A blog is a webpage with articles – blog posts – organized in a chronologically reversed order of their publication" (Elgesem, Steskal, & Diakopoulos, 2015, p. 173).
3. We define social media as

a set of online services that support the production of user-generated content, often based on templates, interaction between users and the compiling of a social network to support communication and which is tied to a node in the form of a profile or a document. (Haider, 2012: 640, p. 640).

This definition includes blogs.

4. To illustrate, on 30 December 2017, she posted the results from her own reader survey, which 4000 readers answered. According to Underbara Clara, 70% of these had followed her blog 5 years or longer, and over 25% had read it between 8 and 11 years.

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